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Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity (Book Review)

Kyle Van Arendonk

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Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity by Leon Kass (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002) 197 pp.
Reviewed by Kyle Van Arendonk, Class of '04, premedical student at the University of Iowa.

In *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, Dr. Leon Kass addresses a variety of issues that have risen out of the rapid growth of biotechnology. Cloning, embryo research, organ sales, genetic engineering: Kass looks closely at these scientific marvels to see their effects on humanity. In the early chapters, Kass discusses the failure of bioethicists to *act* adequately on these crucial issues. Then he lays out the perspective with which he weighs the benefits and costs to humanity for each of these breakthroughs in biotechnology.

Kass possesses the credibility needed to write about biotechnology and bioethics. He is currently serving as chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics after being appointed to this position by President Bush in 2001. According to the President's Council on Bioethics website, Kass received his B.S. and M.D. degrees from the University of Chicago and later a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Harvard University. While Kass was doing research in molecular biology at the National Institutes of Health during the '60s, cloning first came to the table of scientific discussion and attracted Kass's attention. This interest in the cloning debate eventually led him into the field of bioethics. His most recent work in bioethics has been as a professor at the University of Chicago, although he is currently on leave from that position as he chairs the President's Council on Bioethics. Kass's experience in science, as a doctor, researcher, and most recently a philosopher on ethics, shows that he has the knowledge needed to write this book. Understanding his religious background is also important for reading the book. A devout Jew, Kass makes references to the Old Testament and emphasizes tradition.

Kass's thesis in *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity* is that we are facing a critical point in history and, therefore, must take steps to prevent a posthuman future like the one depicted in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Today's "brave new biology," as Kass calls it, threatens to degrade human dignity, or the worth of human life with all its struggles and limitations. The current field of bioethics, obsessed with the liberal principles of liberty and equality, overlooks the real problem with today's biotechnological advances—dehumanization. If we do not act, humanity will become a slave to the science that it has developed to master nature.

In addressing the major issues of biotechnology, Kass does not usually draw clear lines between what he sees as acceptable and unacceptable techniques. He comes out most strongly against cloning, both reproductive and therapeutic, because of cloning's threat to our ideas of identity, individuality, and parent-child relations. He is concerned that cloning will turn procre-

ation into manufacture. Kass also voices his opposition to using in vitro fertilization to produce embryos for third parties, on the grounds of protecting our notion of lineage. For most of the other technologies, he discusses the issues rather than giving clear-cut answers. In his discussion of embryo research, he argues that embryos deserve the respect given to human life. As for genetic engineering, he asserts that the boundary between therapy and enhancement will not be able to hold; he warns, therefore, that the use of genetic engineering threatens our freedom. In his discussion of organ donation, Kass explains the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the donation of organs and the danger of seeing human tissues as property to sell for profit. Kass concludes the book with a discussion of the limitations of biology, including some of its weaknesses such as reductionism, objectification, and materialism.

Kass presents strong arguments against continuing down the slippery slope of biotechnology. His knowledge of the subject matter is obvious, and his experience provides extra support for his arguments. Realizing the widespread disagreement about when life begins, Kass chooses to base his arguments on a different principle—the defense of human dignity. I see this basis of argument as a strength: the book reaches a wider audience than it would reach if it were immediately rejected on an initial disagreement about when life begins. Another strength is Kass's acknowledgment of those who disagree with him. He does not try to fool the reader into believing that his views are unequivocally accepted by all, that other dissenting views are not out there. Rather, he gives both sides of an issue and then explains why he holds the particular view that he does.

I would have liked Kass to state more clearly his judgments of the developments in biotechnology and to draw clear lines between what he accepts and rejects. This desire is probably more my wishful thinking than the book's real weakness. Human nature is most comfortable with black and white issues, and intuitively I want to make clear distinctions between what is right and wrong. But the developments in biotechnology are not issues that can easily be compartmentalized, as this book helped me realize. The only other issue that I wished I could discuss with Kass is his thinking on the status of the human embryo. He argues that human embryos deserve to be respected as human lives but does not go so far as to say that they should be given a *right* to life. According to Kass, ethical questions should not be argued in terms of rights. In other words, he does not believe we should give respect to human embryos on the basis of their possessing certain rights. But, *after* giving embryos the respect they are due

because of their human origin and potential to develop into mature human beings, why *then* does he stop short of also granting them a right to life based on this respect? If indeed embryos deserve the respect that Kass claims, why does he resist also granting them a right to life? Because our country seems to operate on the principle of rights, granting embryos a right to life seems to me a good way of achieving some governmental protection against embryo misuse and destruction.

Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity directly relates to Bill McKibben's *Enough*, another book that examines the developments in biotechnology. Kass and McKibben make similar arguments for restraining the growth and application of biotechnology before it causes radical changes in the human race and civilization as we know it. Both authors see not only the benefits in biotechnology but also the possibility of great harm to humanity if biotechnology is misused. Their arguments are slightly different, however. Kass focuses on biotechnology's threat against human dignity, while McKibben focuses on keeping life meaningful. McKibben also accepts the use of somatic cell engineering, while Kass opposes this practice in the belief that holding the line between it and germ-line engineering would not be possible.

I would especially suggest Chapter 10 of Kass's book to the writers of many science textbooks, to many of my former research colleagues, and to any other scientists who reduce the complexity of human life to only what science can explain. This chapter, entitled "The Permanent Limitations of Biology," explains the limits of science. Many scientists, not acknowledging these limits, believe only what scientific inquiry proves to be true. They reduce all existence to the physical realm and reject any spiritual or supernatural aspects. While science allows us to explore the creation and its workings, it also has limits. When these limitations are not recognized, science and religion can seem to con-

flict. Science is only able to examine the physical world and the laws of nature that govern it. While science can explore all parts of the universe, it can never explain who put the universe here and why.

This book is excellent reading for anyone considering the medical profession. Kass's writing helped me develop opinions about several developments in biotechnology. Although I have taken many science classes, these classes have not been able to address these issues in as much depth as I would have liked. As I wasn't really sure what exactly I believed, Kass's book guided me in developing my own opinions by giving me arguments against some of these technologies, besides the classical argument about life beginning at conception, which I believe but which I realize may be ineffective in today's scientific world.

Developing a solid perspective on these issues in biotechnology is important for someone entering medicine. I will surely run into these dilemmas as a medical student and a physician. A calling to be a disciple of Christ in the medical field includes making one's Christian faith evident in that work. My God-given responsibilities as a Christian physician will include influencing the way biotechnology is applied to medical treatment; that influence will include working against the negative effects of biotechnology to the human race. Preparation for such a task involves a solid background of knowledge about existing technologies and a set of principles to defend. Reading *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity* provides a good start to this preparation.

Works Cited

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